

## *Pisco's Story*



Climbing Mt. Elbert with a llama is an awesome experience! Climbing a mountain with my Pisco makes it even more awesome because of the amazing bond that we share. But as awesome as climbing a mountain is, nothing comes even close to the pride and fulfillment of taking my llama, Pisco, into assisted-living centers and schools as a registered therapy team. Pisco and I are Delta Society Pet Partners, and this is our story.

Pisco was born July 23, 1996 in Pine, Colorado a month after I purchased his mother, Angie. Since he was my firstborn cria (baby llama) and llamas are native to South America, I thought he needed a Peruvian name, so I named him "Pisco".

When he was almost a month old, I moved Angie and Pisco to my brother-in-law's farm in Ft. Collins. Since I was new at this llama business, I wanted to wait until he had a chance to bond with his mother and the other llamas before bringing him to a new environment. My very first endeavor with Pisco was showing him at the National Western Stock Show when he was 7 months old and he won a 4<sup>th</sup> place ribbon! I was so happy I cried tears of joy! Since then, we showed several more times over the next three years and won more ribbons, some first's and second's and third's. After one of the shows in Estes Park when Pisco was about 2, my son thought it would be a good idea if Pisco didn't go back to Ft. Collins. Since Pisco was at the age where the hormones were beginning to come to life as an intact male, he was beginning to become aggressive towards the geldings and assert his authority. Since I was working at Rocky Mountain Llamas in Boulder, I took Pisco with me and was able to spend lots of time with him during my off hours. In good weather, I would take him to the many open spaces in and around Boulder and taught him to lead and to interact with people who always wanted to talk about and touch a llama.

I have a van and, whenever I had my days off, I would bring Pisco home with me to Lakewood. The lady at Rocky Mountain Llamas in Boulder did some PR work with her llamas in nursing homes. Whenever someone in Denver wanted a llama to visit, I would do this for her and the first couple of times, I took one of her llamas. One day I decided to take Pisco and he was amazing for his first time in a big facility with lots of people (as opposed to being in a house). On one occasion, when my mother was a transitional patient at Alpine Living Center in Thornton, I decided to stop in one Saturday evening to visit with her. I went to the Nurse's Station and obtained permission to bring Pisco in to visit Mother. They had no objection and, as we walked into Mother's room, she exclaimed "You can't have him in here!!" I assured her it was okay as Pisco went to her bed and put his head down to sniff. Soon, word got around that there was a llama in the building and folks were coming out of their rooms in their nightclothes to convince themselves that they weren't dreaming. It was about 9 o'clock in the evening and these folks had probably been in bed for a couple of hours. This visit was to be the first of many as our calling to visit Senior Citizens in nursing homes, assisted living and independent living homes was awakened.





We have about a dozen facilities that we visit on a regular basis and it is incredibly heartwarming to see the smiles and sometimes tears of joy on the faces of the residents when this big, wooly, gentle animal pays them a visit in their rooms. Many folks thank us for coming by and are anxious for the next visit. Those that are confined to bed and wheelchairs enjoy giving Pisco a carrot and he certainly enjoys that. Those that are able to walk enjoy sometimes walking alongside Pisco and especially giving him a hug. I instruct the folks to go directly in front of him with arms outstretched and say, "Pisco, give me a hug!" Then, if they put their arms around his neck, he will put his head on their

shoulder, providing, of course, that they are tall enough!

When my parents were much younger and had their home in Northglenn, I would come to visit when I was taking days off from my job. As soon as I got to the door my dad would ask where the llama or llamas were. When I would mention they were in the van, it was important to him that I brought the llamas into their home for a visit. They did very well in the home and most of the time sat down in front of the TV.

My father passed away in October of 2001. The day before his passing we signed him up for hospice care. After all the paper work was filled out, I decided to go home and get Pisco to come see my Dad. For several days prior to this, I would go to my dad's room, tap him on the shoulder and let him know I was there. He acknowledged me but would go right back to sleep. When I brought Pisco in the room and tapped him on the shoulder, he opened his eyes, saw Pisco and reached for the lead rope, which he held onto for about 5 minutes, drawing Pisco's head down to his face. He truly loved my llama, and the hospice person who was watching this was totally amazed that this animal could evoke such emotion from my Dad in his condition. That visit remains a particularly treasured one because unfortunately, my father passed away the next morning.

In addition to visiting nursing homes, we have participated in school programs - mostly in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes when the students have been studying South America, which is home to the four classes of camelids - llama, alpaca, guanaco and vicuna. Most have never been up close and personal with a llama. I will take samples of wool, which was brushed off of Pisco during our grooming sessions. I give a brief background of llamas and how they are used in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile. Incas used llamas as beasts of burden to carry wares to market. Alpacas have finer wool than llamas and vicunas have the finest of all. During the Inca reign, vicuna wool was only allowed to worn by royalty - anyone else caught wearing clothing made of vicuna wool was beheaded!! We have also visited the students in Arvada High School that were studying Spanish. They learned about the history of the llama from their studies of South America and had many questions because most of them had never seen or heard about llamas before.

Pisco and I have been involved in two church programs. Last January, we made an appearance to help raise funds for the Heifer Project at Wellshire Presbyterian Church. The week before Christmas we were in a Nativity play at Church of the Brethren in Littleton. Pisco and I walked in behind Mary and Joseph to the stage. At the end of the production, when the cast was filing out, Pisco stopped by the manger and put his head down as if he was paying his respects. The congregation was in awe.

The Rocky Mountain News wrote an article about Pisco and me last November which was featured in the Spotlight section of the paper. The article featured a visit which took place in The Gardens of

Columbine Assisted Living Center in Littleton. Dee Fernandez, the Life Enrichment Director, and Maria, the Life Enrichment Coordinator at this facility are as excited as the folks that live there when Pisco and I do our visiting!

On April 2, 2003 one of the most exciting things happened! I had spoken with Steve Lusk, a reporter for Channel 4 News. He wanted to join me on a visit to The Gardens of Columbine in order to do a news feature on one of Pisco's visits. Steve joined me at the nursing home and all the residents had been told that Pisco and I were coming to visit. When we arrived, many residents were seated in a half circle in the large entry room. As soon as Pisco and I entered all these elderly residents began clapping and cheering to welcome us!! Each one had a carrot to feed Pisco and they each asked questions about Pisco's age, what all he ate and how we arrived. We visited with about 30 folks and, as we were leaving, they began clapping and asked us to come back soon. Channel 4 broadcast a special segment on this visit, including background on my life with Pisco.



Pisco and I are proud to be a Delta Society registered therapy team and part of the Denver Pet Partners. Over the past 3 years, as a registered therapy team, we have acquired a list of about twelve different Assisted Living Centers and Nursing Homes that Pisco and I visit on a monthly basis, along with a couple of schools. Quite exciting!



*Editor's Note: One has to understand a bit of history about Carol to truly appreciate what makes this story particularly compelling. Last December, Carol lay in a hospital bed in critical condition, having suffered severe head trauma resulting from a collision with a llama while at her ranch in Wyoming. After a 2 week stay in a Cheyenne hospital, and being upgraded from critical to serious condition, Carol was transferred to Craig Rehabilitation Hospital in Englewood. Within 2 months, after extensive rehab for brain injury and her tremendous will to overcome adversity, Carol was discharged from Craig Hospital and was able to return home. As of April, Carol has resumed her passion of sharing her beloved llama, Pisco, with those in need.*

*On behalf of the entire Denver Pet Partners team, Carol, we applaud your courage to overcome, and your undying commitment and dedication to the people whose lives you enhance through animal-assisted activities. Your story is a powerful testament to us all to never give up. Welcome back!!*